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THE BOOKSHELF

SKYSCRAPERS AND THE MEN WHO BUILD THEM

By W. A. Starret

Once in a while the name on the jacket of a book is sufficiently enticing to cause the window-shopper to march right into the store, examine the volume, and make the purchase on the spot. Such is the case with *Skyscrapers and the Men Who Build Them*. It is the kind of book that the non-technical reader can enjoy and that the engineer or engineering student will just revel in.

For this particular critic there is only one obstacle to perfect enjoyment, and that may be a matter of personal prejudice. The frontispiece is a full-page photograph of Colonel Starrett, and his military title and a list of his writings appear on the title page. Not to be too hard on the Colonel, however, be it said that nowhere else does his egotism obtrude, and many readers may obtain satisfaction from knowing what the author looks like and what he has done. In fact, his membership in the A. S. C. E. and A. S. M. E. should be a sort of guarantee of the accuracy of his observations.

The recent publicity to the first royalty received by J. S. Buffington for his patent on steel skeleton structures makes the origin of the skyscraper a matter of interest. Starrett credits Buffington with suggesting the idea about 1880, but says the patent application wasn't made until 1887 or 1888, two or three years after the first skyscraper, the Home Insurance Building in Chicago, was actually completed. The pioneer skyscraper builders were four Chicago men, W. L. B. Jenney, D. H. Burnham, J. W. Root, and William Holabird. It is a shock, perhaps, to learn that New York was not the home of the skyscraper; to Chicago, whose World's Fair of 1893 set a new standard for American architecture, belongs the credit for originating this form of building which Starrett calls the most distinctively American thing in the world.

From the early history of skyscrapers the book proceeds to all the details of construction: designs, plans, contracts, excavations, erection, finishing, problems of labor, job organization and discipline. There are chapters on the making of structural steel, on stone, brick, and terra-cotta. The language is virile, in keeping with the subject; the incidents are told simply and appear to have come from actual observation; there is a genuine thrill in reading about improvising a lift on the old building beside the excavation when the derrick had fallen and broken the mast, about shoring up a big generator set without disturbing the output of electricity, about inexperienced men who, suddenly finding themselves aloft on a slender beam, get down and hug the beam tightly, regardless of wet paint. Technical details of steel fabricating, of quarrying, of erecting, of masonry, of plumbing and ventilating are explained in non-technical language but with an accuracy of detail which will in no way offend experts in that kind of work. Anyhow, the chances are that the experts often

get tired of technical terms and welcome fresh language descriptive of their work.

Whistles, a poem in the Kipling manner by C. D. Chamberlain, appears in the foreword and makes a good text for the whole book. Here is the first stanza:

"The clean-up gang is finished—the last
shanty's coming down;
We've punched our last big payroll out—
let's hunt another town.
There's a million smoky whistles, wheez-
ing gods that we obey,
And the order that they're screaming is
'Builders! On your way!'
So,
Let's speed—speed—speed!
Out to where the whistles plead,
Wailing at their toiling mob,
Laughing at the lives they rob,
Sneering at the biggest job,
There's work to do. Let's GO!"

—J. M. W.

CONDEMNED TO DEVIL'S ISLAND

By Blair Niles

Should the bellicose Mrs. Niles ever attempt to enter the domain of *la belle France* again, we venture the prediction that the very least that the minions of that government would do would be to draw and quarter her. Never before have we seen any nation given such a powerful black eye via the printed page. Mrs. Niles, in a lady-like way, endeavors to show us that the French are nothing but a bunch of barbarians clinging to mediaeval practices.

Devil's Island is the Sunday-supplement name of the penal colony located in French Guiana. The practice, since the acquisition of that fever-infested strip, has been to ship certain of the criminals of France there for detention. The bad customers are segregated from the rest and are imprisoned on Devil's Island, a tiny speck of land located in the harbor of Cayenne, the capital, and separated from that town by dangerous waters. Escape is not impossible (those who have escaped may be counted on the fingers of one hand) but it is highly improbable. Those who try to leave this resort are either ground up on the rocks by the relentless waters or else provide sustenance for the numerous sharks that infest the waters. Jolly people, the French!

Things on the mainland are not as bad but are far from what might be termed pleasant. The convicts are worked in the jungles at odd tasks, lumbering for the most part. Such work for the natives is highly enervating while for the man accustomed to northerly climes it is positively deadly.

Living conditions are frightful, evinced by the emaciated condition of the men. However, the time of sentence is not what is dreaded by the convict, but the time he must spend as an exile. Every sentence is accompanied by an equal time

(Continued on Page 24)



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BOOKSHELF

(Continued from Page 12)

of exile. During the latter period, the men must live on what they earn. This is usually nothing and consequently they do not live.

Mrs. Niles with her husband visited French Guiana and wrote a series of articles for the *New York Times*. These proved so popular that she was persuaded to write a book. This is rather a hard task, due to the type of subject material. However, she hit on the plan of writing the book in the form of a story of a composite convict. The material was all gathered at first hand and the detail, while it may not relate to one convict in particular, covers the group as a whole.

The details are surprising. That such an institution as this is permitted to exist at the present will cast a shadow on the French. The message that Mrs. Niles brings to the public is that the prevailing conditions are not known in France. Let us hope that this scourge is soon removed.

M. L. A.

THE FEMALE OF THE SPECIES

H. C. McNeile

As you may have guessed, the title of this book is taken from that verse of Kipling's:

*"When the Himalayan peasant meets the
he-bear in his pride,
He shouts to scare the monster, who will
often turn aside.
But the she-bear, thus accosted, rends
the peasant tooth and nail,
For the female of the species is more
deadly than the male."*

And the woman, *Irma*, attempts to prove this by a series of the most diabolical crimes and man-traps, that she sets to catch *Bulldog Drummond* as he searches for his wife *Phyllis*, whom *Irma* has abducted. The half-mad, scheming woman fixes all her man-traps after the manner of a treasure hunt, sending one clue each day to the frenzied *Captain Drummond*. And he in turn, with his small group of associates, follows them up and attempts to get hold of some member of the other party to find out where his wife is being kept.

The woman, *Irma*, while mentally unbalanced, adopts some very clever ruses to get her quarry, *Drummond* and his party, into her control. She tries to gas them, drown them, choke them, and otherwise annihilate them, and she comes very close to doing it. But of course the story would not be true to form unless the *Bulldog* and his boys succeeded in the end.

This book is a "thriller" in every sense of the word. It is as full of action as a western movie. This type of story can have no other purpose than to amuse, as there is no historical background, no moral, nor anything worthwhile in it except for a few hours innocent diversion.—R. M. E.

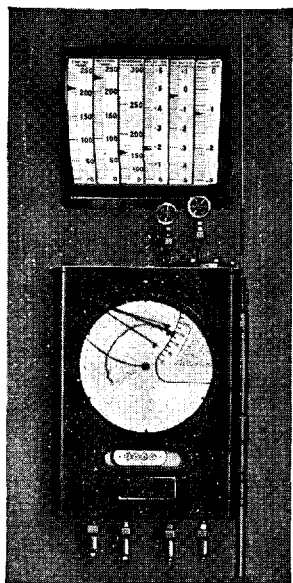
FICTION

Emperor Francis Joseph of Austria
By Joseph Redlich

Personal study of the next to the last of the House of Hapsburg by a member of the Austrian Parliament.

MARCH, 1929

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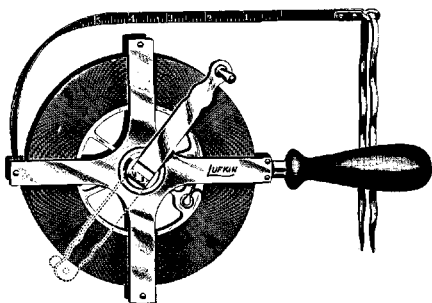
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